

Update of UNHCR's operations in Europe

A. Situational analysis including new developments

People in need of international protection continued to seek safety throughout Europe, as part of movements involving refugees and migrants, while facing physical, legal and administrative restrictions.

During the first seven months of 2018, refugee and migrant arrivals to the European Union were lower than in the previous two years, and dropped by 41 per cent compared to last year. While arrivals decreased significantly in Italy, there was an increase in Spain and Greece.

All countries in the Western Balkans experienced increases in the number of arrivals reported as of the end of August 2018 compared to the whole of 2017. This was particularly the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina with some 11,900 arrivals as of the end of August 2018, already 30 times greater than the 380 during the whole of 2017. The number of asylum-seekers in the Balkans have also increased with over 5,600 people between January and July 2018, 45 times greater than the 126 during the same period in 2017.

Due to increased restrictions in some countries, many refugees and migrants resorted to dangerous alternative routes when moving to and across Europe. So far, more than 1,640 people have lost their lives or have gone missing since the beginning of 2018 in the Mediterranean Sea. In the first seven months of 2018, 74 deaths were recorded along land routes in Europe, compared to 42 in the same period last year.

Between January and July 2018, 38 European countries received some 306,900 new asylum applications, representing a 23 per cent decrease compared to the same period in 2017. Of these, 98 per cent (300,700 applications) were lodged in European Union member States, primarily in Germany (81,200), France (51,300), Italy (31,400) and Greece (29,300). In 32 European countries¹, among the Mediterranean arrivals, asylum applicants in 2018 mainly originated from the Syrian Arab Republic (40,100 or 15 per cent), Iraq (19,600 or 7 per cent), Afghanistan (18,800 or 7 per cent) and Nigeria (13,600 or 5 per cent). Turkey continued to host the largest number of refugees worldwide. Of these, 3.5 million were Syrians, and the remaining 370,390 were refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR of various nationalities.

Since the conflict in Ukraine began in 2014, nearly 1.8 million people have been internally displaced, and over 480,000 Ukrainians have sought asylum in other countries, including the Russian Federation (427,240), Italy (12,530), Germany (10,830) and Spain (9,260). More than 1.4 million applications for other forms of legal stay were also submitted by Ukrainians, mainly in the Russian Federation, as well as in Belarus and Poland. In 2017, the situation in eastern Ukraine continued to be marked by security incidents.

¹ This included 28 European Union plus four European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland)

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Reforming the CEAS and strengthening the collective European response

Efforts to improve current European Union asylum law, through the reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), remained challenging, particularly with regards to the establishment of solidarity measures and the efficient reception of new arrivals. As several States chose to focus mainly on border management, admissibility and return, UNHCR in turn emphasized the need for responsibility-sharing and advocated the establishment of an internal relocation mechanism to support EU States under pressure from large numbers of arrivals. UNHCR developed a proposal for accelerated and simplified procedures to process manifestly unfounded and well-founded asylum claims. A regional disembarkation mechanism and support for search-and-rescue operations involving all coastal States was also proposed by UNHCR, together with the International Organization for Migration (IOM)

Ensuring an effective operational response

UNHCR worked closely with governments and other partners to enhance response capacity and contingency planning, in particular regarding reception arrangements. Although there were welcome developments in providing more legal and safe pathways for persons in need of international protection, including through increased resettlement pledges, further work in this area remains necessary. UNHCR maintained its operational engagement in Europe, including efforts to establish a better evidence-base for protection interventions. Strengthened communication with local communities led to enhanced prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and increased protection of children. To improve integration prospects for refugees, UNHCR explored opportunities to collaborate with governments, notably with local authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector, and national and international development actors.

While the urban accommodation scheme and cash programme in Greece provided direct and much needed support to asylum-seekers, the operation embarked on a transition strategy to consolidate its interventions. UNHCR collaborated with the local government and helped develop its structures to support the integration of refugees. The local government was then able to take over some of the support and assistance activities. Following the increased arrivals by sea in Spain, and a strong interest by the Spanish Government to address existing gaps in a collaborative manner, UNHCR reviewed its operational involvement to ensure an appropriate response.

Safeguarding asylum space and building effective protection systems

In western and central Europe, UNHCR supported the right to access asylum through an enhanced and systematic monitoring of data collection capacity. The organization engaged strategically in national legislative developments. UNHCR strengthened its operational protection response and carried out evidence-based strategic advocacy initiatives. UNHCR worked closely with local authorities to strengthen their reception capacity and to reinforce the identification and referral of persons with specific needs. The organization also helped develop methodologies adapted to the mixed migration and onward movement context.

In eastern Europe, the “quality initiative” provided a regional forum for capacity development. Participating countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) shared common challenges with regards to asylum procedures, including the balancing of national security considerations with relevant provisions in international refugee law. UNHCR is investing in community empowerment activities and support for the integration of refugees.

In the Russian Federation, access to asylum procedures remained a challenge for undocumented asylum-seekers, particularly at airports. Positive approaches were adopted

with regard to some categories of persons with international protection needs, which could form the basis for further steps to ensure access to protection for those in need.

In Turkey, UNHCR developed and implemented a social cohesion strategy together with key government authorities and concerned communities.

In the western Balkans, UNHCR continued to address cross-regional movements by intensifying information-sharing and consolidating interventions between offices in the western Balkans and central Europe. At the country level, activities included supporting screening and referral mechanisms for refugees and migrants, as well as the provision of basic assistance and access to services.

Promoting acceptable reception conditions

In order to establish minimum standards, UNHCR monitored reception conditions and worked closely with the authorities and other stakeholders to provide technical expertise. This included the establishment of mechanisms for the identification and referral of persons with specific needs to handle child protection issues and to prevent and respond to SGBV. Prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse was a key priority for UNHCR operations in the region. Staff were trained, and collaboration in this area was strengthened with all partners to ensure full compliance with the zero tolerance policy. Nonetheless, challenging issues remained throughout Europe, including inadequate living conditions, lack of accommodation space, insufficient identification and response mechanisms for persons with special needs and the use of detention/closed facilities. Several initiatives were implemented to improve reception conditions for children in Bulgaria, Greece and Italy. Taking into account the “best interest of the child” and other child protection considerations, UNHCR advocated family-based and community care arrangements in order to avoid the institutionalization of children. As Greece is still experiencing significant numbers of arrivals, support has been extended to expand accommodation space, notably for unaccompanied and separated children, in order to avoid overcrowding and related protection risks.

Strengthening participatory and community-based approaches

Concerted efforts were made by UNHCR across Europe to strengthen participatory and community-based approaches. The Refugee Coalition for Europe, comprised of refugees living in different countries on the continent, was established with support from UNHCR in 2017 with the aim of providing a platform for refugee participation and consultation. Refugees came together and formulated the structure and objectives of the coalition in 2018. In addition, a pilot project between UNHCR and the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) commenced in four locations with the rolling-out of a refugee outreach volunteer initiative. A website was launched in several countries, including Austria, Cyprus, Germany, Greece and Turkey, and will continue to be rolled out in more operations as an information tool for asylum-seekers and refugees.² Participatory assessments took place regularly in all countries, while there were further efforts made to establish effective feedback mechanisms on UNHCR programming and interventions. A toolkit for teachers was developed to raise awareness about asylum-seekers and refugees in the classroom and to provide guidance on psycho-social support for displaced children displaying behavioural signs of stress or trauma. The first European youth initiative fund was launched in 2018, by UNHCR and its partner, the European Youth Forum, awarding 10 small grants to youth-led projects that promote social cohesion activities across Europe.

Securing solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons

UNHCR engaged traditional actors in promoting the integration of refugees and developed new partnerships for solutions in cooperation with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). A joint action plan was launched in

² See help.unhcr.org.

April 2018, to expand employment opportunities for refugees and to identify key actions to ensure the successful integration of refugees in the labour market.³

Negotiations on a European Commission proposal for a Union Resettlement Framework progressed, and UNHCR continued to support the European Union institutions by providing both practical and policy expertise on resettlement and humanitarian admission. Meanwhile, 20 European Union member States have pledged over 50,000 resettlement places for 2018-2019. As the need for places is estimated to be much higher, the effective implementation of these pledges will be key.

Community-based sponsorship approaches were well received, including through the activities of the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI), with a pilot programme in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and commitments made in other countries, such as Ireland and Spain.

In the Western Balkans, UNHCR supported Kosovo (S/RES/1244 (1999))⁴ and Montenegro with a view to resolving civil registration issues and identifying solutions for the remaining complex cases. UNHCR took part in a profiling exercise in Kosovo (S/RES/1244 (1999)) aimed at clarifying the status of the populations still affected by the 1999 conflict.

In Ukraine, UNHCR is implementing a five-year strategy for internally displaced persons (IDPs). The organization continued to respond to emergencies, conduct shelter repairs and provide protection, including support to persons with special needs. Where IDPs have found solutions, UNHCR is preparing for a responsible disengagement.

Preventing and resolving situations of statelessness

UNHCR continued to actively address statelessness through the implementation of regional initiatives, cooperation with NGOs, judicial engagement and monitoring.

In May 2018, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the protection of children in migration, calling on member States to ensure that childhood statelessness be adequately addressed in national laws. UNHCR and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) jointly supported a visit of Georgian officials to Bosnia and Herzegovina to review good practices and legislation in addressing the situation of the Roma population.

Montenegro adopted a new law in February 2018, which established a statelessness determination procedure. UNHCR provided support to other countries preparing to adopt or implement similar procedures, including Greece and Ukraine. To enhance efforts aimed at improving the identification and registration of persons at risk of statelessness in Albania, UNHCR published, together with its partner and the Government of Albania, a report which outlined the risk of statelessness in the country.⁵ Iceland aligned its legislation with the standards set out in the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness through amendments to its Nationality Act. In Switzerland, the final report outlining the results of a statelessness study will be issued later this year.

Strengthening external relations and advocacy, and mobilizing support

Through its participation in national United Nations country teams, UNHCR supported the objectives of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development and strived to ensure that persons of concern were included in the sustainable development goal nationalization processes.

UNHCR is co-chairing, together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Issue-based Coalition on Large Movements of People, Displacement and Resilience, an inter-agency platform to exchange key advocacy messages and find

³ Available from <http://www.unhcr.org/5adde9904>.

⁴ Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999)

⁵ See <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5b59e36b7.html>.

solutions for persons of concern. In 2018, the coalition supported governments through participation in mainstreaming, acceleration and policy support (MAPS) missions.

UNHCR and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) signed a joint letter in January 2018, updating the joint coordination and cooperation note on the refugee and migrant situation in Europe. This will enhance collaboration in a number of key areas, such as child protection, education, cash assistance and information management.

C. Financial information

The budget for Europe approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, during its sixty eighth session in October 2017, amounted to \$876.3 million for 2018.

Thirty-two per cent of the budget for Europe was allocated to the central Mediterranean route situation, while 43 per cent was allocated for Syrian refugees. The Ukraine situation represents three per cent of the overall budget.

At the sub-regional level, 56 per cent of the overall budget was allocated to operations in eastern Europe,⁶ five per cent to south-eastern Europe, and 39 per cent to central, northern, southern and western Europe.

As of end of August 2018, voluntary contributions totalling \$388.9 million towards the region's 2018 financial requirements had been recorded, corresponding to only 44 per cent of the needs in the region.

⁶ This includes the operation in Turkey, which represents 89 per cent of the eastern Europe budget.